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TEXT UNDERLAY IN MARGUERITE OF AUSTRIA'S CHANSON ALBUM BRUSSELS 228*

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[p. 33:] There seems to be a widely held belief that the views of sixteenth-century theorists such as Lanfranco, Zarlino, Stoquerus, and so on, represent our best hope of understanding how composers and performers matched syllables to notes in the music of earlier times. In an admirable attempt to seek guidelines for the texting of Dufay's songs by looking at the practice of composers in two previous centuries, Leeman Perkins still landed up in a position heavily dependent in certain respects on later Renaissance thinking.¹ And in a detailed discussion about the handling of text underlay in a recent modern edition of a major late-fifteenth-century chansonnier, Howard Mayer Brown felt constrained to write:²

We must begin with the assumption that text was sung to the chansons in Florence 229 in a way compatible to a greater or lesser degree with later practice. We must, in short, use the later rules as a hypothetical basis for our speculative interpretations, but with all due caution, and with the clear understanding that new theoretical evidence may come to light to modify or even change our understanding of the conventions.

It is perhaps symptomatic of our present thinking about early music that we should put the theoretical cart before the horse of observable custom and practice. Yet I would venture to suggest that our difficulties with the topic of text underlay before Lanfranco stem largely from the fact that we have not yet systematically addressed the evidence presented by the music itself and its presentation in the sources. There may, after all, be no *a priori* rules before Lanfranco, but that is not to say that earlier composers and singers had no identifiable habits in this regard. There is a history of text underlay style to be written, and we do not have to await the discovery of a medieval Zarlino to embark on it.

Howard Brown admittedly has a point when he bemoans the absence of any consistent scribal practice in the late fifteenth century. And, as everybody knows, many songs of the period present exceedingly knotty problems to anyone trying to underlay text according to purely empirical methods. What is often overlooked,

* I am grateful to Alamire Music Publishers for permission to reproduce this article here, following its original publication in *Muziek aan het Hof van Margaretha van Oostenrijk* (Peer, Belgium: Musica, 1987), 33–47. The text incorporates a few typographical corrections but is otherwise unchanged, save in one significant respect: the accentual patterns associated with reciting the alphabet and counting one to ten (p. 7), are now shown with conventional accent marks (´). Formerly I had used macrons (¯) and breves (˘), which while widely employed to denote accentual rhythm are surely best confined to indicating something quite different: what is long and what is short.

¹ L. L. Perkins, 'Toward a Rational Approach to Text Placement in the Secular Music of Dufay's Time', *Papers read to the Dufay Quincentenary Conference*, ed. A. W. Atlas (New York 1976), 102–114, 152–169.

² H. M. Brown, ed., *A Florentine Chansonnier from the Time of Lorenzo the Magnificent: Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, MS Banco Rari 229*, *Monuments of Renaissance Music*, 7 (Chicago, 1983), ii. 170.

however, is that we need only go back to around the middle of the fifteenth century to find ourselves at the end of an extended era when composers wrote many songs in which scope for ambiguity in text underlay is minimal; enough to reveal an extraordinary long-term consistency of texting practice and to provide a more than adequate guide to what is required in those songs which might otherwise land us in difficulties. Moreover the earliest sources, while by no means free of ambiguity and error, characteristically show a concern with the correspondence between notes and words quite lacking in their later counterparts. What makes such observations relevant to the topic here addressed is the striking continuity of the chanson repertory from the earliest *formes-fixes* examples of around 1300 to those such as make up the bulk of Marguerite of Austria's two surviving chanson albums.

[p. 34:] Martin Picker observes that in Marguerite's smaller and earlier song collection, MS 11239 at the Royal Library in Brussels, 'little concern is shown for matching words and syllables to the appropriate notes'.³ He adds that in this respect it is 'more typical of early sixteenth-century chansonniers than is MS 228', its larger sequel, in which 'virtually all texts are carefully underlaid to the Music'. On this account the later book, compiled at some time between 1516 and 1523, should be particularly useful for the study of word-setting. The purpose of the present paper is to expound various aspects of its testimony on text underlay, and to seek to explain, comment and assess them in the light of earlier more easily codifiable practices. In the short space available I shall concentrate on the superius parts of a handful of songs which show a strong stylistic continuity with the past. If we can establish that the scribe of Brussels 228 is here consistent with earlier practice then we shall have good reason for taking seriously his texting of certain more problematical contemporary songs which depart from earlier tradition in various ways.

The relative clarity of note and syllable correspondence in manuscripts from the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries is bound up with the prevailing methods of copying, in so far as they can be ascertained. In most such manuscripts the text seems to have been written first, due allowance being made in the spacing for melismas. The music was then added, typically with notes grouped so as to clarify their attendant syllables. In fact the text was not underlaid at all; the music was overlaid.⁴

It seems certain that the scribe of Brussels 228, like most of his contemporaries, always copied the music first, without any regard for the text to be underlaid subsequently. It is vital to consider the implications of this in order to interpret his intentions correctly. When he adds text he does so more or less immediately under the note to which it should be sung wherever possible. But because individual syllables take up more space than individual notes there can be no universal matching of the two comparable with what we find in earlier manuscripts, and the scribe is often forced to place syllables well beyond the notes to which they belong. In many cases it is obvious that the alignment of notes and syllables cannot be taken literally (Figure 1, bars 17ff). In other instances non-literal interpretations must have been just as instinctive to readers steeped in contemporary song tradition. Sometimes, however, there is real ambiguity. The opening of La Rue's *Pour ung jamais* is a case in point. My transcription (Figure 3) represents how I feel a singer at Marguerite's court would

³ M. Picker, *The Chanson Albums of Marguerite of Austria* (Berkeley 1965), 5.

⁴ Some scribes were apparently concerned about this aspect to the extent that they copied both words and music in tandem. See M. Bent, 'Text Setting in Sacred Music of the Early 15th Century: Evidence and Implications', *Musik und Text in der Mehrstimmigkeit des 11. und 15. Jahrhunderts*, Göttinger musikwissenschaftliche Arbeiten, 10 (Kassel, 1984), 291–326.

most likely have deployed the syllables, but I have to admit that there are other ways that would be stylistically acceptable.

The writer of Brussels 228 was rarely if ever constrained to crowd his text solely in order to make it fit a short musical phrase. He took such drastic measures only when necessary to synchronise text and music at the ends of staves, at which points he is unfailingly plausible in his matching of syllables to notes. He rarely anticipates the designated note when underlaying the text, with the important and widespread exception that where a text phrase ends with a word of more than one syllable the final syllable may not be split off, even if the melody implies delay in performance (Figure 1, bars 27–31 and 40–42). This convention is common throughout the late medieval and Renaissance periods.

[p. 37:] With these important provisos in mind, we may now look at the treatment in Brussels 228 of Compère's rondeau *Sourdez, regretz*, a chanson Marguerite might well have encountered during her infancy at the French court (Figure 1). The text underlay style of its Superius voice shows strong continuity with that prevalent earlier in the fifteenth century, and there are few serious ambiguities in the manuscript's text placement.



① Sour - dez, re - gretz, a - vi - - - - - ron -
 - - - nez mon cuer ② Tout de sous -
 - - pirs, de paine et de dou - leur,
 ③ Puis qu'ain - - - sy est qu'ay ma da - me per -
 du - - - - - e. ④ J'ai - mas - - - - -
 - - se mieux ja - mais ne l'a - voir
 veu - - - - - e, ⑤ Pour en es - tre si
 long - temps en lan - gueur.

[pp. 35–6:] Figure 1. Superius of Compère's *Sourdez, regretz*: a) Brussels 228, fo. 54^v (detail); b) transcription.

It can readily be seen that Compère has divided his text into units, each with its own phrase of music. The units correspond rather obviously to the formal structure of the poem in that the boundaries between them coincide with line endings and with the fourth-syllable caesuras which occur within every line. We might equally observe, however, that the units follow the syntactical structure of the words which in this case, as in many other contemporary lyrics, is identical with the formal structure.

The care with which most fifteenth-century composers split their texts into clauses, and match them with corresponding musical phrases, is also evident in the internal organisation of such units. But it is on this level that the driving forces which unite the words and music are, in my opinion, most commonly misunderstood. Few indeed have been the discussions of fifteenth-century underlay that have not invoked, at some stage, sixteenth-century notions of 'just note and accent', either to justify some particular syllable placement or to decry implicitly the insensitivity of medieval composers to this aspect of the words they set. Yet everything we know of the tradition of lyric verse behind the texts of Marguerite's chanson albums points to how little their authors were concerned about the regular and predictable distribution of verbal stresses within lines in relation to the all-important matters of rhyme and syllable counting.⁵ If we centre our investigations around the musical accentuation of individual words we shall be doomed to failure.

We would do better to begin by considering the various ways in which melismas are deployed. Before the mid-fifteenth century Dufay and his contemporaries had

⁵ For a recent summary of the arguments, and of the literature, see J. Stevens, *Words and Music in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge 1986), especially Chapter I. For a discussion of possible links between word and musical accent in fifteenth-century motets see W. Elders, 'Humanism and Early-Renaissance Music', *Tijdschrift van de Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis*, 27/2 (1977), 65–101.

tended to confine melismas to the final counted syllables of text units. An uncounted syllable at the end of the text unit – one containing a so-called mute *e* – need not be present, but if it is it will often be assigned to the last note of the melisma. There tends to be a distinction in musical styles between syllabic and melismatic passages. Often this is sufficiently marked for the intended syllable underlay to be evident even in sources where underlay is unclear or otherwise misleading, or where words are missing altogether. The melismas Brussels 228 indicates in *Sourdez, regretz* at the ends of all lines save the first, and at the caesuras in lines four and five, though quite short, are direct successors to this tradition. Later we shall consider whether text repetition is desirable at the ends of lines three and five, but for the present we can say that in the context of earlier tradition there is nothing remarkable about the rests which break up the melismas at these points.

After 1450 there is an increasing tendency for melismas to penetrate inside text phrases, reactivating a tradition which in song had lain largely dormant since before Dufay. Compère's *Sourdez, regretz* shows that a musical distinction between syllabic and melismatic styles tends to be maintained here too.

So much for what might be called the 'temporal' deployment of syllables. There is another dimension which we might describe as 'accentual'. From the beginnings of mensural notation until well into the sixteenth century, whenever [p. 38:] pre-existing verse is freshly set to music, composers consistently tend to arrange successive syllables within units of text into some kind of regular metric pattern whenever circumstances permit. Units of text with even numbers of syllables are often perceived as series of iambs (sometimes beginning with an 'inverted foot'); those with odd numbers as a series of trochees. This tendency is self-evident in hundreds of songs in syllabic or mildly melismatic style, for example in the virelais of Machaut, and in most of Dufay's songs up to around 1450. It is also obvious in selected passages from many later and more expansive songs, as the last two lines of *Sourdez, regretz* show. In such a context it can readily be seen that the melismatic syllables that pervade the first three lines of Compère's chanson are also deployed on notes susceptible to rhythmic interpretation as alternately weak and strong, reckoning back from the final counted syllable. I choose my words carefully here because of the lack of any agreed criteria for the rhythmic analysis of fifteenth-century music. For the present we may content ourselves with the observation that in *Sourdez, regretz* all the odd-numbered syllables set melodically fall to notes beginning off the main semibreve pulse or tactus, the even-numbered to those on the beat.

One need only look at the caesura in line five (bar 44) to see that the accentuation of individual words in *Sourdez, regretz* is subordinate to the overall metric scheme of the music. Does Compère's setting imply then a corresponding underlying accentual pattern inherent in the poem itself? Fortunately there is no need to open this philological can of worms, for our next example shows that such a conclusion will not do.

Agricola's bergerette *Je n'ay dueil* (Figure 2) must have been written at latest by the early 1480s on account of the date of some of its many sources. It was presumably intended as a response to a rondeau by Ockeghem which begins with the same words and whose initial contratenor phrase Agricola uses as an opening point of imitation. Later Agricola was to serve Marguerite's brother Philip the Handsome at the Hapsburg-Burgundian court from 1500 to his death in 1506. Unlike Compère, Agricola has come to be regarded as a composer with little regard for the niceties of text setting; in the measured tones of the New Grove Dictionary of Music, 'few of his compositions are word orientated'.



2
① Je n'ay dueil que de vous ne
9
vien - - - - - gne; ② Mais quel - que
17
mal que je sous - tien - - - gne, ③ J'ay
25
trop plus chier vivre en dou - - - leur
33
④ Que souf - - - - - firr que mon
41
po - vre cueur ⑤ A ung aul -
49
tre qu'a vous se - tien - - - - - gne. [Etc.]

[pp. 39–40:] Figure 2. Superius of Agricola's *Je n'ay deuil que de vous ne viengne* (refrain): a) Brussels 228, fo. 20^v (detail); b) transcription.

The formal structure of the bergerette here set by Agricola may control the phrase structure of the music to the extent that line ends coincide with the ends of melodic sentences. But since there is no regular caesura it cannot be responsible for the musical subdivisions of lines one and four. These appear to be determined by the syntax of the words rather than by the form of the poem.

The significance of syntax in determining musical phrasing can be traced back as far as the earliest noted repertoires of chant.⁶ Its role in song is less obvious because of the frequent congruity of formal and syntactical structures on which we remarked earlier. Yet there are plenty of examples in fifteenth-century song – indeed in earlier repertoires – where syntax is surely a crucial factor in the articulation of musical phrases. In some instances the syntactical shape goes so far as to override the formal scheme.

In such circumstances it is usually inevitable that the expected regular dimetric flow of syllables we identified in connection with Compère's song will be disrupted. In *Je n'ay dueil* the disarray is total in the second section of line one, with marked inconsistencies of accentuation between the Superius and the remaining [p. 40:] voices. We must abandon then any notion that the way verse is set to music reveals some kind of inherent accentual metre. Agricola's song also provides further testimony, if any were needed, that speech accent can scarcely have any role to play in determining underlay.

What are we to make, then, of the accentual patterns imposed on the words in Compère's song (which, we may recall, follows an overwhelmingly prevalent fifteenth-century tradition), and which still prevail in most remaining lines of Agricola's? I would suggest that the explanation is nearer to hand than we think. It reflects, quite simply, the way we count. Recite the alphabet – and you will find yourself speaking in dimeters:

Á B C D É F G / H I J K L M / N Ó P Q R S T Ú / V W _ X Y Z

Count up to ten – and you will find the same, except that since we like to begin and end on accented syllables we have to break the regular pattern at some stage by fitting in a trimeter:

Í 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

The letters of the alphabet and the sequence of cardinal numbers have a neutrality comparable with the numeric structure which underlies the poems of this period and much else besides.

It is time to turn to a song whose origins are still more closely associated with those of Brussels 228. *Pour ung jamais* (Figure 3), which opens the section of the album devoted to three-part songs, is a setting of one of Marguerite's own poems by her court composer Pierre de la Rue. I referred earlier to the ambiguities in Brussels 228's texting of the opening phrase. There are several other places where more than one reading is possible, but I shall not dwell on them here since the song compels us to consider other questions of more far-reaching significance. Martin Picker observed that in Brussels 228 'some phrase repetitions are fully written out, a rarity in manuscripts before 1530'.⁷ The last line of *Pour ung jamais* is a case in point, brought about by the presence of an exact musical repeat. Elsewhere in the song text repetition is clearly implied by the provision of new melodic material apparently expressly designed for the words in question.

⁶ R. Jonsson and L. Treitler, 'Medieval Music and Language: A Reconsideration of the Relationship', *Music and Language*, Studies in the History of Music, 1 (New York, 1983), 1–23.

⁷ M. Picker, *op. cit.*, 3.



4

① Pour ung ja - mais, [pour ung ja - mais,]

11 ung re - gret ma de - meu - - - - re ② Qui,

19 sans ces - ser, nuyt et jour, [nuyt et jour,] a toute heu - re ③ Tant

26 me tour - men - - - te que bien voul - droy [mo - rir, que bien voul -

34 droy] mo - - - - rir, ④ Car ma vie est fors seu - le - ment lan -

42 guir, ⑤ Par - quoy faul - dra en la fin, [en la fin] que

49 je meu - - - - re, en la fin que je meu - - - - re.

[pp. 41–2:] Figure 3. Superius of La Rue's *Pour ung jamais ung regret me demeure*: a) Brussels 228, fo. 50^v (detail); b) transcription

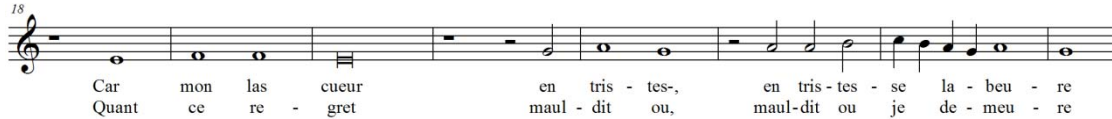
[p. 43:] Sporadic examples of this kind of text repetition, explicit or implied, can be traced back at least to the beginning of the fifteenth century. Initially the phenomenon is closely associated with Italian music (Ciconia's *O rosa bella* and Dufay's *Dona gentile* contain notable examples), and with settings of popular material (Dufay's *La belle se siet*). Its spread to the main tradition of French courtly chanson towards the end of the century has yet to be fully documented, but it is undoubtedly against this background that La Rue's use of it is to be understood.

There is another kind of text repetition in Brussels 228: [p. 44:] in Figure 4 the words are repeated solely for the purpose of filling up melismas. Brussels 228 is, I believe, one of the first song manuscripts to employ text repetition in this the same spirit that Zarlino later condoned. Earlier manuscripts, particularly those before 1450 which attempt to indicate text underlay with some precision, show no inclination whatever to use text repetition in this way, however long the melisma. This applies even when, as is often the case at line ends and caesuras, the melisma is sufficiently prolonged to embrace more than one musical phrase separated by rests, and is interposed between the stem of a word and its final mute *e* syllable. Ockeghem would, I think, have expected his final phrase to be sung melismatically in the traditional way, rather than with repeated text as here, at least there is no compelling contemporary evidence to suppose otherwise. Similarly the concluding melismas to lines three and five of Compère's *Sourdez, regretz*, which we considered earlier, seem stylistically appropriate for their time, though it is not unlikely that after a period of two or three decades, and at a different court such as Marguerite's, singers may have opted to dilute them with word repetition.



[p. 43:] Figure 4. Superius of Ockeghem's *Je n'ay dueil que je ne suis morte*: a) Brussels 228, fo. 15^v (detail); b) transcription.

It goes almost without saying that La Rue's *Pour ung jamais* is highly responsive to the syntactical structure of its text. This is most obvious in line two where syllables five to seven, 'nuit et jour', are detached from their neighbours to considerable expressive effect (note that here again the inherent speech accentuation of the words is of no consequence for the musical setting). But what of these lines in stanzas two and three which are written out in full at the foot of the Superius part and are surely intended to be sung too?:



Here the settings sound ludicrous to our modern ears. Yet the problem (if such it be) is not an unusual one; it crops up constantly not only in Brussels 228 but in countless *formes-fixes* settings by earlier generations of composers. Our inclination in such circumstances is to reposition the syllables, sometimes making drastic adjustments to the melody in the process. Whether such action has any warrant in sixteenth-century and earlier practice is a largely unexplored question which cannot detain us now.

It is tempting to condemn La Rue's settings of stanzas two and three on the grounds that they go against the words. Zarlino would certainly have done so. But that is to elevate the long-standing traditions of word setting we have been observing to the status of some kind of pre-sixteenth-century 'code of practice' for word setting, comparable with those of the Renaissance theorists. This has yet to be established. Perhaps we had better come to terms with the fact that these verses are to all intents and purposes contrafacta. For while we may be drawn to admire the special qualities of music bound to words at the conceptual stage, we [p. 45:] cannot afford to dismiss the artistic validity of pieces whose words and music were never intended specifically for each other. Their role becomes more pervasive the further back we go into the Middle Ages.

We have so far skated round the question of how the testimony of the scribe of Brussels 228 relates to the conception or intention of composers on the one hand and the practice of singers on the other. The powerful influence of formal and syntactical structures on text underlay habits, taken in conjunction with traditional ways of deploying syllables both temporally and accentually, serves in many cases to circumscribe the possibilities of text underlay to the extent that all three protagonists must be in agreement.

[p. 46:] Yet the very fact that most sources after 1450 fail to notate text underlay with anything like the clarity and precision of Brussels 228 surely reflects something fundamental about contemporary attitudes to text. Musicians of this period, we must accept, saw the matching of syllables to notes with considerably less fixity than their forebears or successors. We can perhaps see some of this approach in the way the scribe of Brussels 228 has texted the *ouvert* and *clos* sections of Agricola's *bergerette Je n'ay dueil*, the only incidence in the manuscript where two different texts are underlaid to the same music (Figure 5).

The differences here cannot stem from the words; rather we have two variants with equal stylistic credibility. Perhaps the scribe considered the second an improvement on the first? Be that as it may, neither one nor the other need represent the composer's 'conception'. In countless other instances the Brussels 228's readings must be regarded as 'interpretations', or better 'realisations', of composers' blueprints for text underlay.



[p. 45:] Figure 5. Last couplet lines of Agricola's *Je n'ay deuil que de vous ne viengne*: a) Brussels 228, fo. 21^v (detail); b) transcription.

Of course some composers are harder to realise than others. Paradoxically the most difficult of all in Marguerite's albums is probably Pierre de la Rue, the composer closest both to her and to her scribe. His *Pour ung jamais* is arguably among the most traditional of his chansons and perhaps for that reason least problematic. Other songs by him seem to have offered such a wide choice of texting options as to have led the scribe into error.⁸ Such uncertainty was surely experienced by contemporary singers too.

In some instances the compiler of Brussels 228 went beyond the range of text provision originally envisaged by the composer. The lower voices of some songs were probably never conceived in terms of text at all. This is the most likely explanation for some arbitrary and inelegant texting in the contratenor of Compère's *Sourdez, regretz*, for example. In adding words to such parts the scribe was undoubtedly reflecting changed fashions in performance.⁹

In spite of these foibles it should be plain by now that Brussels 228 is not only exceptional for its time in the clarity of its text underlay, it is also remarkably consistent both within itself and with earlier custom and practice. It is therefore a most valuable source of information about text underlay. The areas of insecurity and compromise in the manuscript are worth studying in their own right. Perhaps the most

⁸ See the various emendations to the words footnoted in Picker's edition. These represent, of course, only the most obvious errors; other questionable readings could be added.

⁹ L. Litterick, 'Performing Franco-Netherlandish Secular Music of the Late 15th Century: Texted and Untexted Parts in the Sources', *Early Music*, 8 (1980), 474–85.

remarkable thing about them in the present context is that they are essentially of the early sixteenth century's own making. This points to the existence of considerable confusion among performers of the time about text underlay, a position not without its parallels in the matter of *musica ficta*. The conditions were ripe for the formulation of rules, and it is appropriate at this point to return to the sixteenth-century theorists I referred to at the beginning of this paper.

The earliest systematic guidelines we have on this topic were published by Lanfranco in Brescia in 1533.¹⁰ Addressed to choirboys, they refer primarily to the performance of contemporary Latin sacred music, with passing references to French chanson and to the practice of Josquin's time. Lanfranco's rules do not have the air of being revolutionary, and they surely did not grow up overnight. Yet it is extremely misleading to project them back even as far as Marguerite's time, let alone further back into the fifteenth century, simply because they fail to deal adequately with many of the ways composers actually wrote music at such times. It is also unnecessary; the manuscript presentation, and in many instances the music itself, is a much more authoritative guide.

[p. 47:] In fact Brussels 228 shows that of all the stated sixteenth-century principles of underlay, only one was firmly established in the song repertory of Marguerite's court – the rule that a syllable must be assigned to the first note of a piece. Many of the other rules, however, can be observed in an embryonic state. For example, the tendency of several composers to juxtapose syllabic and melismatic treatments of syllables while at the same time retaining a stylistic melodic distinction is surely at the root of what later becomes codified as a series of rules about the allocation of syllables where semi-minims are present (see Figure 1, bars 33–34; Figure 2, bars 3–4, 41–48).¹¹

Even manuscripts like Brussels 11239, which more characteristically for their time present songs with imprecisely underlaid text, have something to tell us about certain rules which Leeman Perkins not unreasonably dubbed 'simplistic'.¹² For example, behind the admonitions not to use more than one syllable for a ligature, a single note, or a dotted note, surely lies a time when singers had to do just that, because of the tendency of scribes to join together notes originally intended for separate syllables.¹³

In short, I would like to stand the whole argument about the sixteenth-century theorists and earlier underlay on its head. Renaissance writers do not represent our best hope of understanding how words should be fitted to notes in fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century song; rather the songs themselves, and their presentation in manuscripts like Brussels 228, represent our best hope for fully understanding the sixteenth-century theorists.

¹⁰ D. Harrán, 'New Light on the Question of Text Underlay prior to Zarlino', *Acta musicologica*, 15 (1971), 24–56.

¹¹ Compare Perkins, *op. cit.*, 111.

¹² *Op. cit.*, 103.

¹³ I am grateful to Joshua Rifkin for suggesting this idea to me.